Books and Authors

Length without Strength

O'Hara Treads Familiar Road

By HARRISON SMITH

IN A TIME when American writers insist on bringing out long books, John O'Hara has reached the climax in his 897-page novel, "From the Terrace." No one who has read a few of his other books, "Appointment in Samarra," "Butterfield 8," or "A Page to Live," can fail to recognize in his early chapters the territory he has made his own: the Pennsylvania town of his forebears, a prep school, and Princetown University.

The Alfred Eaton of the novel is the son of the ironmaster owner of Eaton Iron and Steel. The novel is based on his career in Wall Street and on his amorous life with two women—his wife and the young woman who became his mistress. Before he settled in New York Alfred Eaton had left Princeton to enter the First World War as a naval officer, and later he was engaged in the early aviation business.

From the Terrace intends to present an uncompromising study of an intelligent and successful man through the first half of the 20th century, but the reader may wonder if there were many young men of that strenuous era who had any close resemblance to Alfred Eaton.

Mr. O'Hara's earlier critics described the central figure in **A Rage to Live** as a portrait of no apparent purpose, no special depth, and no discoverable literary or artistic function. His Alfred Eaton seems to lack some of the qualities that should be necessary for the central figure of this novel. It can be said that he destroyed his wife through his lack of any real affection for her. But when the novel delves into finance and Alfred Eaton's functions as a cabinet officer, dealing with a vital aspect of the war, he becomes a young genius. (He is one of the few men in his circle who are convinced that the Second World War will not be ended in the course of a year.)

The sexual aspects of the novel occasionally give it a slight resemblance to pornographic literature. Nevertheless, **From the Terrace** is a book that cannot be neglected, though its inordinate length may try the reader's patience. But one may inquire what is the meaning of **From the Terrace**. Was Eaton destroyed by his alliance with his first wife, for he may well have tamed her into the virago who despised and hated him, or by his long sexual connection with the young mistress who became his second wife? In the end, Alfred Eaton is a tragic figure, with few friends and nothing to do. The destruction of the terrace outside his house is a symbol of his ruin.

"Well, after all, we always were more space-conscious than the Russians: we were brought up on Buck Rogers, Flash Gordon, Ray Bradbury, *Astounding Science-Fiction* Magazine . . ."

Sam Adams Won't Read

'The TENDERLOIN' his PLAYGROUND

By JOHN BARKHAM

TOO BAD SAM ADAMS didn't live to see this last novel of his published, "The Tenderloin," Random House. (It could have been his 40th or 50th—no one kept accurate count.) The old man put a great deal of his youthful experience as a New York reporter into this one, and those who knew him well said he looked forward to its publication with all the eagerness of a young man awaiting publication of his maiden novel. Alas, he died in his 88th year, just as the book was going to press.

For the benefit of younger readers who may be unfamiliar with a term once widely current, the title of the book refers not to a prime cut of beef but to a New York City precinct west of Broadway which, in the words of the dictionary, "afforded police officers luscious opportunities for graft". Specifically, it was New York's red light and gambling district. Mr. Adams has set his story in this "Tenderloin" district during the Gay Nineties, drawing heavily on his own remembrance of the place, the period and the people.

The story itself is as colorful, animated and flavorful as the period suggests. It was a time of the-hell-with-it gaiety. There hadn't been a war in living memory and everyone who could was trying to have fun and get rich quickly. Police collected their takes while Tammany Hall looked the other way. Enter the Rev. Dr. Brockholst Farr, the dour, highminded dominie of the Old Stone Church, who was determined to reform New York even if the city fathers would not.

Here we have a situation rich in possibilities. Before he is through with him Mr. Adams has put his crusading cleric in the bawdy houses of the tenderloin district to confront Satan in the flesh. What happens to him there is not quite what the worthy Dr. Farr expected and gives the story its suspense. It isn't exactly avant garde writing, but it's good fun in an old-fashioned way.

Like the old hand he is (or was), Mr. Adams has crowded his cast with zestful characters and has fleshed out the action with various romances and subplots. The Police Gazette reporter is, I imagine, drawn form his own experience as a reporter in the gaslight era. But the personal touch can be detected throughout the book's dialogue, and especially in the flamboyant investigation which gives the novel its climax.

Mr. Adams recorded his narrative in the rather high-flown prose peculiar to the period. In fact, the whole story mirrors that over-perfumed era in manner and matter. I'm not surprised the book is under consideration for a Broadway musical. What hit tunes could be written for its spicy tableaux!

His the Body, Her's the Head

JANE AUSTEN'S WORK 'FINISHED'

ALTHOUGH the Jane Austen cult has never been as devout in Canada as it is in England, the incomparable Jane has enough admirers on this side of the water to ensure a sizeable readership for this attempt by an English writer to complete what the good lady began in "The Watsons", (Thos. Crowell). At that, I may add, he is the third to try his hand at it, which brings to mind the half-dozen or so efforts to complete Dickens' unfinished "Mystery of Edwin Drood." The novelist treads on perilous ground who attempts to match himself against Jane Austen; yet it is precisely because her style is so pellucid, her mannerisms so unique that the temptation to do so must always exist.

The Watsons was written about 1804 or 1805, and was then put aside for some reason. It is easy to surmise why: with several masterpieces already written, Jane Austen had yet to achieve recognition. Some students of the Austen canon incline to the belief that she dropped **The Watsons** because she lost interest in the story. The few chapters she wrote merely to introduce her cast of characters—the Watson family, with an ailing father and four marriageable daughters; the eligible bachelor peer, Lord Osborne; his former chaplain and tutor and now rector of the parish, Mr. Howard; the flirtatious young blade, Tom Musgrave, and sundry subsidiary figures. Emma is the handsomest of the Watson daughters. Jane describes her thus: "Her manners and address were those usually met with in a young lady of 19 summers, and not many people had yet troubled to look for more in one who had already showed to such advantage." Not unexpectedly, Emma attracts the attention of Lord Osborne at a ball. At this point the fragment ends, and Mr. Coates steps in.

Not to put too fine a point on it, he has done uncommonly well in what amounts to a full-length pastiche. The transition itself is skillfully performed (it occurs on page 65), and, unless you are forewarned, you may well miss the gentleman's entry.

He has changed Emma's name to Emily (a wise step, remembering Jane Austen's other celebrated Emma), and has made various other changes in the original—none, however, of a disruptive character—to support the substantial body he has attached to the Austen head. Since the remainder of the plot was confided by Jane to her sister, Cassandra, Mr. Coates in general follows the lady's directions. Emily rejects the hand of Lord Osborne (who marries her sister instead), and accepts the worthy Mr. Howard. The story ends, indeed, in a whirl of weddings as the Watson daughters march into matrimony.

Though Mr. Coates would be the last to claim that he possesses the wit, grace and elegance of a Jane Austen, dedicated Austenites should not be offended by his tale, and might even find it entertaining. The rest of us will discover it to be not merely an item of literary curiosa, but a charming and skillful period novel in its own right—J.B.